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ABSTRACT

The concept of open or progressive education has come to mean that to learn one needs no discipline, no systematic organization, no planning. However, there is a middle, or at least another ground, between the ends of laissez faire and authoritarianism. It has to do with the structure of process. For example, the Key Vocabulary of Sylvia Ashton-Warner is as structured as it is possible to get in terms of process. The learning situations must be so structured that the child will dredge up, so to speak, his or her own vocabulary. This structure of process comes from the child's own living experiences. When this structure in the learning process is present, there is a rigor in the acquisition of skills and knowledge. And when that learning is based upon the child's inner sources, the teacher will not have much need for discipline imposed from without. A teacher must discover how to get such ideas from within the given child. From these ideas come the words that can be turned into writing, and on into reading. (HOD)

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The Alternative to Progressive Education and Mastery Learning Practices

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The Alternative to Progressive Education
and Mastery Learning Practices.

PANEL PRESENTATION OF
JEANNETTE VEATCH

With no little trepidation, I must question the concept of Open Education, or Progressive Education, as it has been interpreted. Perhaps I am the one that can do this as my credentials as an Open Educator are, I think, unassailable.The problem, as I see it, with the awful condition of teaching in our nation's schools, is that the teachings of John Dewey are not being followed. He was clear, but those that have come since are decidedly mixed up. For example, take the play and movie"Auntie Mame",in which her nephew goes to a progressive school where they learn about the birds and the bees by taking their clothes off. Audiences laughed, but, I suspect, said to themselves "No child of mine will go through that kind of nonsense."

And nonsense it was. It has come to mean that to learn in a progressive school,one needs no discipline, no systematic organization, no planning. You can do as you please. Through these past decades Progressivism and its later counterpart, Open Education,has been identified as one extreme end of a continuum that has Authoritarianism at the other end. That is, there is laissez faire at one pole that is all choice or doing-as-one-pleases, and no rhyme,reason,rigor or system. While at the other pole there is planning, rigor and organization and NO choice. In

fact,at that pole,choice is to be prevented.

So we are saddled at present with the extremes of behavioral objective writings, of cognitive domains, of prescriptive teachings and the like, which destructively, I think, insist that children master one tiny item after another, in succession,as alleged to be logical by authorities who have established that that is the way learning develops.They have, I submit, loosed the dogs of war on little children. Such sequences may be logical, but to impose them without using the internal experience and personal interest of the learnere is grossly ineffective.

In the 50's I was supervising student teachers from New York University. I had several placed in private schools of that city that had national reputations. Whatever may have been their original claims to fame, by the time my students arrived, the problem that still plagues us, which I noted to begin with, was in full bloom. These schools did not know the difference between laissez faire, all choice, (and chaos) and no choice(mandates). In one school whose name you would recognize, every year,the same middle grade did the post office, and another the store, regardless of the desires, interests, or inner motivations of the pupils concerned. Yet in those same classrooms there was the wildest of activity, with accidental learning coming from spontaneous occurrences. The sterility, the low-man-on-the-totem-pole of my students, the confusion about what was teaching, what was instruction, even what was education, that I pulled my

students out, for all of our sakes.

Frank Jennings tells the story of his first days in the fifth grade of another one of those schools. He found the kids wild,uncontrolled, with no respect for order of any kind. One boy, in defiance against Frank, stood on the window sill, which was five floors above the street. Frank TOOK him down, turned him over his knee and paddled him. "There goes my job," he told his wife that night. The next day, as expected,the father arrived, but to Frank's amazement, rushed over to him, threw his arms around Frank and said "At last!" Thus began a fruitful year for all concerned. At the end of the term Frank, alone, took the entire group on an overnight trip to the State Capitol.

These show that parameters are necessary. Parameters can promote, not prevent,education. Yet if the parameters are too restrictive, and must follow a series of adult developed objectives,the seeds of destruction of a democratic society will find fertile soil.

For that is what democracy is all about. The organized, systematic process, by which,children become creative, productive individuals,rather than programmed robots. I am suggesting that there is a middle, or at least another ground between the ends of laissez faire and authoritarianism. Somewhere in this middle we have left out something important. I think it has to do with the meaning of the word STRUCTURE. But the structure I am concerned about is the structure of process, not, as Benjamin Bloom and others would have it, the structure of content.

As a classroom example, there is no better than that of Sylvia Ashton Warner's Key Vocabulary. It is as structured as you can get in terms of process. If you dont do certain things right, you dont elicit a useable vocabulary from the child. The learning situation must be so structured that the child will dredge up, so to speak, from the middle of himself, those words, unexpected to the teacher.Such dynamic, vital ,"special"words."Ghosts, Lightning, Monsters and the like" are widely reported, in all languages, around the world. It would be impossible to get such words by means of a list in a set of behavioral objectives.

This is the structure of process to which I refer. Without a firm concept of the child's inner resources of living experience, you are stuck for learning. A teacher must figure out how to get such ideas from within the given child.From these ideas come words which can be turned into writing, and on into reading. If you teach a child something that has no relation to his OWN living breathing, experience, you might just as well get out of teaching. For these living experiences are the major source of the structure of education.

I knew a teacher once, who used to tell her pupils,"When you are in bed tonight, think of something you can write tomorrow." They would come to school the next day brimming with contributions, for the paper, for wide black spaces of the chalk board, for the typewriter. They were "just dying"to contribute. Their inventiveness then

gave the teacher what she needed to teach them. She took those words, and taught spelling and punctuation, and all of those things that make a literate mind. She checked off what she had taught, and later, when she saw some item had been missed, she taught that! But she developed a set of authors who were excited about writing. It was no chore in that classroom.

I dont think you need to charm children in order to get them to learn. In itself education, learning,is exciting and stimulating and wonderful. It is not entertainment, but it is as exciting as if it were entertainment.When you are in such a learning situation it is almost like falling in love (I nearly got fired, and did NOT get hired,once for saying just that, but it is true.)

So there does have to be structure in the learning process. When it is present,there is rigor in the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Open Education has not been good at that. Those who claim allegiance to Open Education have allowed the stigma of the Auntie Mames to make that word an anathema. Discipline and parameters are essential. Certainly there is a time to say"Stop" or " "Sit down!"but children will accept such orders when they are excited about what they are doing, what they are learning. And when that learning is based upon their inner sources, you wont have much need for discipline imposed from without.

Another example of misunderstanding appeared,in of all

places,the Christian Science Monitor,when an article castigated Piaget as producing a generation of "me-ism" in the schools. Nothing,indeed,, could be further from the intent of Piaget. I was outraged and wrote to the editor in complaint. Of all the authorities who advocated the structure of process it was Piaget. As you well know, manipulating objects and the recognition of what such means is a process of maturation. Impose certain manipulations on a child and you get nothing. because the"good Lord hasn't yet growed him up enough." I was gratified to get a personal response from their recently retired editor, Cynthia Parsons,who had watched helplessly and who saw such things more clearly than many professors I have known.

Similarly I might talk about the concept of "invented spelling". At age five that kind of spelling, which is really the internalization of the alphabet, is what you want.Why? Because it gets the writing going. But at the fifth grade level, to allow continued such phoneticisms, seems to me, to be an abdication of teaching. The child of ten has already developed his capacity for invention using the letters of the alphabet and recognition of sound patterns.Now he needs to learn how to spell correctly,based on such a solid foundation.

So, to me, structure of process is the important thing. It occupies a different area from laissez faire lack of controls, to the rigidities of imposed authoritarian controls That area comes from the inner experience of the pupil.Once it is elicited, then children are going to

learn.They will find it hard perhaps, but it will be more than fun. It will be glorious!"